THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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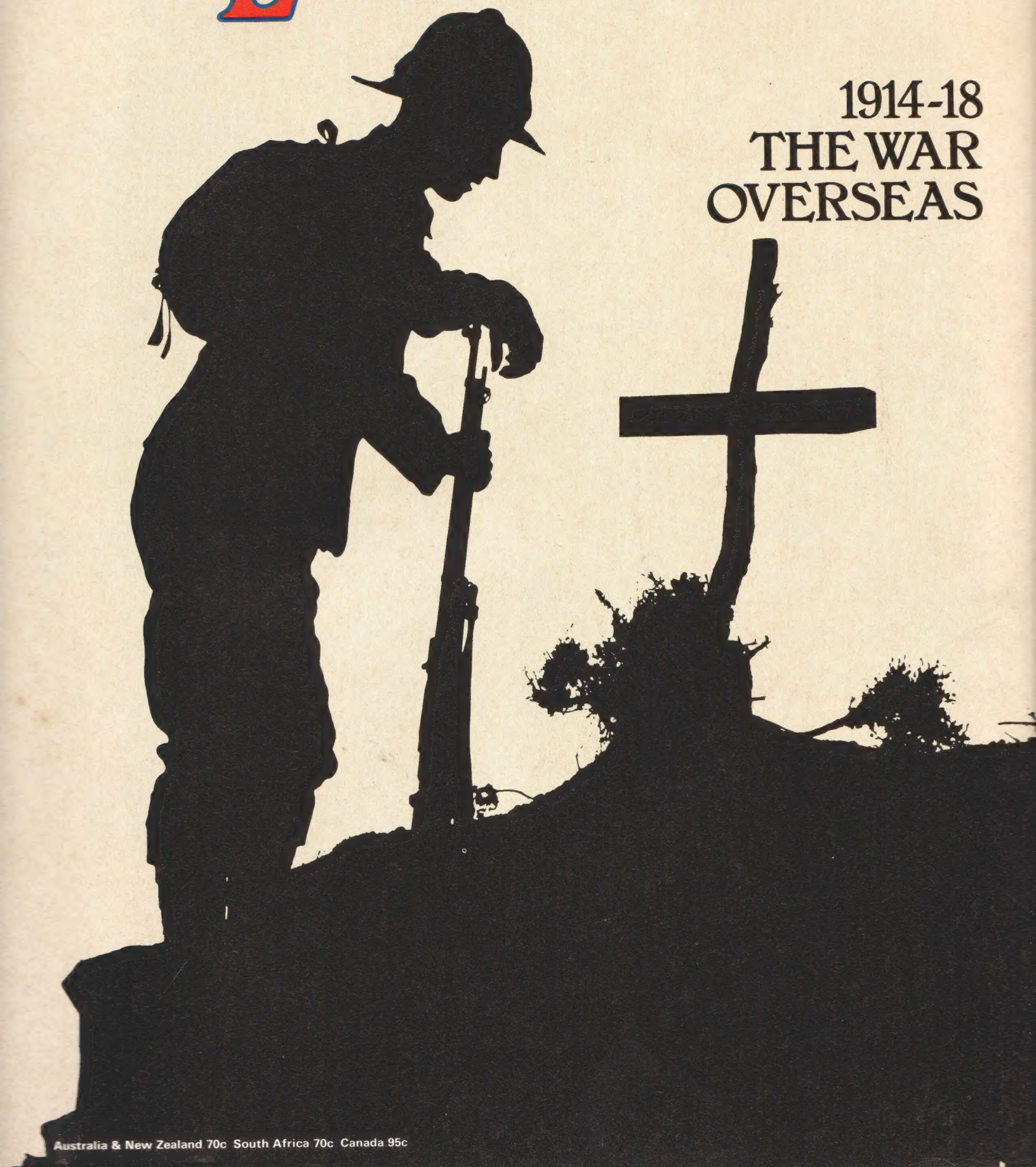
1914-18 THE WAR OVERSEAS



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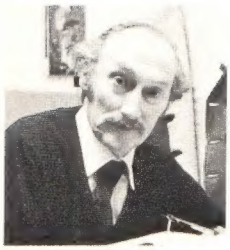

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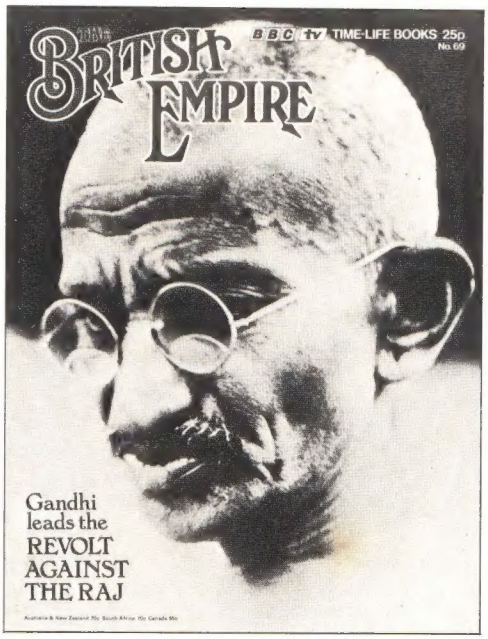

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1914-18
THE WAR OVERSEAS

Locked in the titanic struggle on the Western Front, Britain was able to spare few men or resources for the arenas of war beyond Europe. In the Pacific, in Egypt and the Middle East, in Africa and at Gallipoli the peoples of the Empire shared the burden of conflict. Their generous sacrifice helped to save the mother country at her time of peril. But it also fostered a sense of self-awareness and independence which challenged old concepts. Britain would never again be able to exercise her role as the exclusive arbiter of imperial policy.

by George Bruce

War is the great solvent. It is at once so grim and so inspiring that, by comparison, almost anything else seems dwarfed. Obstacles to social and political change are swept aside and new forces find room for action.

Thus, as early in the war as July, 1915, Sir Robert Borden of Canada, the first Empire Prime Minister ever to attend a British Cabinet meeting, felt compelled to challenge Britain's right to unquestioned leadership. The old concept of Empire was dead, he told an audience at the Guildhall in London. "The great policies which touch and control the issues of peace and war concern more than the people of these islands."

Australia, South Africa and India were soon echoing these challenging views. For they, with Canada, were expending so much of their youthful national energy that they were no longer prepared to be dictated to by the mother country. In victory they sensed their own power in the world; and in defeat they resented their subjection to British leaders who planned the costly campaigns.

These sentiments were greatly strengthened by the war overseas, where British power was less in evidence than on the Western Front and where Empire troops frequently took the brunt of the fighting. From the prolonged struggle in German East Africa, from the disastrous Gallipoli campaign and from the changing fortunes of the war at sea, a new outlook on Empire was born.

Only three months after war broke out, British prestige at sea received a shattering blow. On November 1, 1914, Rear-Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock attacked a powerful German squadron in the Pacific, off the Chilean coaling port of Coronel. The German ships, under Admiral Maximilian von Spee, included two heavy cruisers, the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, and three light cruisers. Cradock's own squadron, in contrast, consisted of three outdated cruisers – *Monmouth*, *Good Hope* and *Glasgow* – and the armed merchantman *Otranto*. They were no match for the Germans. Almost at once, one of the *Good Hope*'s ammunition magazines was hit and she blew up with a roar of flame, lost with all hands. Soon afterwards the *Monmouth* was hit, and followed the *Good Hope* to the bottom of the Pacific. Wisely, the *Glasgow* and *Otranto* turned and fled.

The British lion paternally reviews his cubs in a *Punch* cartoon of 1914. Soon the cubs were to grow

For the Royal Navy it was a disaster. Von Spee's squadron was now a menace to Allied shipping in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

But, a month later, a second British squadron of two modern battle-cruisers and five light cruisers won a decisive victory at the Battle of the Falkland Islands. Commanded by Admiral Sir Frederick Sturdee, they reached the Falkland Islands for coaling early in December. While they were there, the enemy raiders sighted them and steamed off in alarm. Sturdee's cruisers gave chase and in a tremendous battle on December 8, 1914, sank the *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, *Leipzig* and *Nürnberg*.

Meanwhile, there had been another naval success in the Indian Ocean. Since the start of the war, the *Emden*, a 3,600-ton German light cruiser, had been attacking merchant vessels in the eastern seas, especially in the Indian Ocean, where she had sunk no less than 70,000 tons of British shipping. In late 1914, the *Emden* was ordered to cut a vital British cable link with Australia at its vulnerable point on Direction Island, one of the Cocos Islands midway between Australia and Ceylon. The *Emden* was well-known as a three-funnelled ship, but to disguise her, Captain von Müller had rigged her with a fourth canvas funnel.

Unfortunately for von Müller, when he approached Direction Island on November 9, the cable station personnel spotted at once that this funnel was "palpably canvas" and radioed a call for help just before a strong German landing party raised the cable to Australia out of the sea and cut it. The wireless message was picked up by two Australian light cruisers only about 50 miles away. One of them – the *Sydney* – was dispatched at high speed, and came upon the *Emden* just as she was steaming away from Direction Island.

The *Emden* opened fire at a range of between five and six miles – "very accurate and rapid to begin with,"

up and demand a share of power.

reported Captain John Glossop, of the *Sydney*. But the situation changed rapidly. Faster than her enemy and able to out-gun her too, the *Sydney* moved out of range and hit the *Emden* at will as the two ships sailed north. After an hour and forty minutes of cruel bombardment, von Müller ran his battered ship ashore on a reef off the most northerly of the Cocos Islands, to keep her from sinking.

"The conditions in the *Emden*," reported Captain Glossop, "were indescribable; the decks were a litter of tangled ironwork amid which, as in a shambles, lay dead and dying, and men with suppurating wounds."

The only German raider now to be accounted for was the *Königsberg*, which, since September 20, had been sheltering up the maze of creeks at the mouth of the Rufiji River in German East Africa. In July, 1915, two shallow-draught vessels, specially sent out from Britain, managed to penetrate the bristling German defences and reduced the *Königsberg* to a wreck. These victories greatly enhanced British naval prestige. But in Australia, the jubilation over the sinking of the *Emden* – an entirely Australian victory – was mixed with more questioning of Britain's dominant role in Empire affairs.

Then came the Gallipoli disaster. Its huge and futile losses of New Zealand, Australian and Indian troops, its barren defeat and fruitless withdrawal, all under British leadership, could not simply be explained away as part of the overall cost of defeating the enemy. For some time the full story was muffled by censorship, but enough became known of the bad judgement of British politicians and generals to give further impetus to demands for full partnership in Empire policy-making.

The German East Africa campaign highlighted even more obviously the need for Empire participation. It began with a lamentable British failure in November, 1914, when Major-General A.E. Aitken bungled an attempt to land and seize the port of Tanga, about 130 miles north of Dar-es-Salaam. General von Lettow-Vorbeck's German-officered African troops, the askaris, easily repulsed the invaders and made harder any future invasion of the territory.

Subsequently, the herculean task of conquering German East Africa – all that remained of Germany's overseas empire – was assigned, not to an Englishman, but to a South African soldier and statesman, General Jan Christiaan Smuts, and the main burden of the fighting passed out of British hands.

Smuts assumed command in February, 1916. Instead of attempting another coastal landing, he outwitted the formidable von Lettow-Vorbeck by invading across the frontier of British East Africa (now Kenya) as part of a southward drive against the enemy. His brigades of mounted Boer commandos, some of whom had fought against the British in the Boer war, were as suited to this grim tropical environment as any white men could possibly be, and were experts at a style of fighting which called for rapid night marches and surprise attacks.

They were able to surprise the enemy in his best defensive positions and make a move on the Dar-es-Salaam to Lake Tanganyika railway, which cut the country from east to west across its centre. At the same time Smuts sent Brigadier-General Jan van Deventer, another South African, on a swift march west to cut the railway farther inland from his own objective. Battles were constantly fought in forest or jungle or bush, and casualties were high for both sides – despite the German superiority in machine-guns and artillery.

Of this most arduous campaign, Captain Angus Buchanan, 25th Royal Fusiliers, wrote: "Our greatest enemy was the ever-blinding, ever-foiling bush and jungle-growth; our second enemy was the intensely hot climate, and subsequent disease; the third enemy was the shortage of adequate rations; and the fourth enemy was the grim tenacity of a stubborn and worthy foe."

To avoid encirclement, von Lettow-Vorbeck had to fall back to the Uluguru mountains in the south. Eventually, a mixed Empire force of South Africans, British, Indians and Africans drove the Germans, now barely 10,000 strong, into the south-east corner of the country. Von Lettow-Vorbeck slipped across the frontier into Portuguese Africa with 2,000 chosen men, where he held out until the war's end.

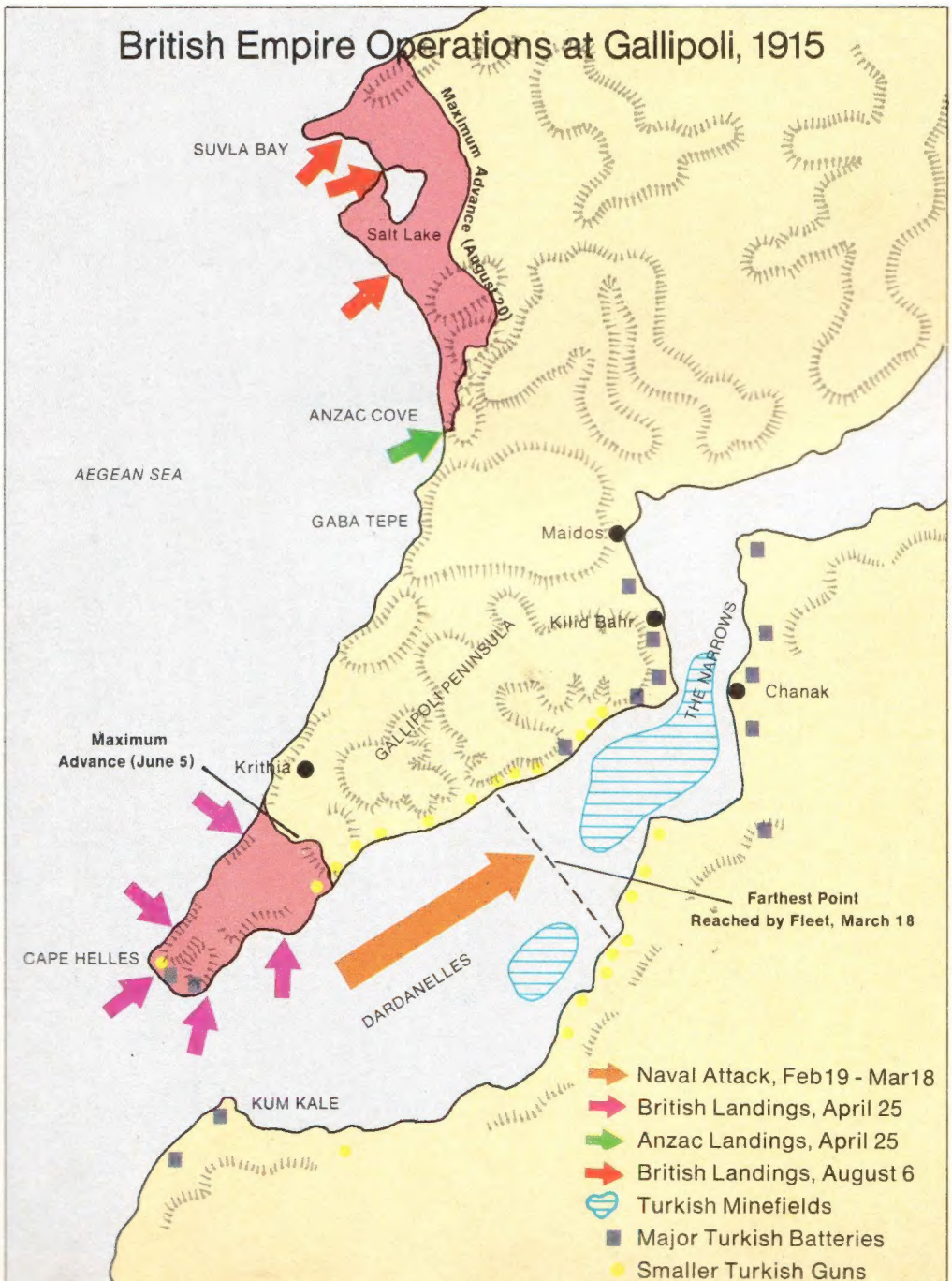
Before the end of the campaign Smuts handed over to General van Deventer and went to London to take part in an Imperial War Cabinet composed of representatives of Empire countries as well as of Britain. This new political role was a reflection on his towering importance to the Empire war effort, and on the changing balance between Britain and her colonies.

At the first Imperial Conference soon afterwards, Sir Robert Borden moved a resolution calling for the Empire's future constitution to be "based upon a full recognition of the Dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth, and of India as an important portion of the same," and urged "the right of the Dominions and India to an adequate voice in foreign policy and foreign relations."

It passed readily, for the Empire had altered irrevocably under the stress of the Great War. The overseas campaigns and naval battles, no less than the ruinous struggle on the Western Front, had brought about changes in the Empire's constitution which, in peacetime, might not have occurred until years later.

GALLIPOLI

When an Anglo-French naval attempt to force a passage through the Dardanelles to Constantinople was stopped by Turkish minefields, Britain decided to seize the strategically placed Turkish peninsula of Gallipoli. Almost 30,000 Anzacs were among the assault force that struggled ashore at dawn on April 25, 1915. But a worse terrain for the invasion could hardly have been chosen. Gallipoli's narrow beaches and unmapped hinterland were dominated by fortified heights from which the Turks were able to direct a murderous fire. For eight months Empire troops endured a merciless punishment, until they were withdrawn in the most disastrous and humiliating defeat of the First World War.



The map shows the line of the unsuccessful Allied naval attack up the Dardanelles and the even more disastrous Empire landings on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

This panoramic photograph, taken from above Anzac Cove, scene of the April 25 landings, shows how the mountains dominated the Gallipoli landing beaches.

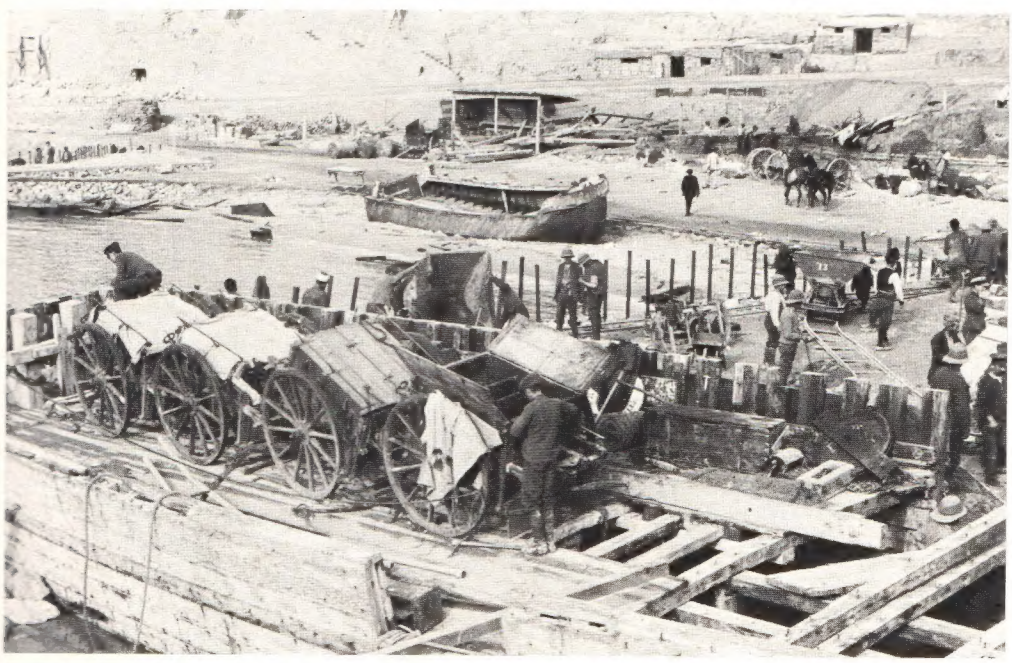
The Bungling before the Shooting

Bungling was the keynote of the Gallipoli expedition – then history's biggest amphibious strike. Only two weeks before its proposed date, General Sir Ian Hamilton, classical scholar and poet, still had no plan of attack, no military staff, no accurate maps or charts, no knowledge of the enemy dispositions and no idea where to land his 73,000 men.

Even worse, when the British joined the Anzacs at Lemnos Island, in the Aegean, they found that their guns, ammunition and stores had been loaded into the ships in England in hopeless confusion. Guns were in one ship, ammunition in another, fuses for shells in a third. To disregard this would have been fatal to the success of the landings, so the ships had to sail to Alexandria, re-load and return.

This crucial delay gave General von Sanders, German Commander-in-Chief of the Turks, the chance he needed. He had learned what was afoot – his agents had reported that letters to the British in Alexandria were addressed "Constantinople Force, Egypt" and now he had the time to prepare powerful defences. The campaign had opened with blunders at the highest level. Many more were to occur before its end.

More than 1,600 horses, donkeys and mules stand idle on Gallipoli's Suvla beach. They were intended as a cavalry reserve or for haulage. But few would actually be used.



Supply wagons are landed on improvised jetties in an operation known as the Lancashire Landing after the Lancashire Fusiliers who had gained a foothold here after grim fighting.

Some of the 30,000 Anzacs who were to storm the Gallipoli beaches at dawn on April 25, 1915, relax on the *Lutzow*, a captured enemy ship converted for troop-carrying.

A Heath Robinson Campaign

Usually so efficient, the British had rushed their troops to Gallipoli without regard even to basic commonsense, much less detailed military planning. "The slip-shod manner in which the troops have been sent out from England is something awful," complained Rear-Admiral Wemyss.

There was a serious shortage of guns and one of the two British divisions used a different rifle and bullets from the other troops. There were no hand grenades – they had to be improvised from empty food cans – and the six trench mortars that were available were Japanese-made and soon ran out of shells.

Absent, too, were army engineers and the materials and equipment necessary for constructing piers and jetties on Gallipoli's beaches, which made it impossible to land ammunition and supplies quickly. These elementary mistakes all took their toll when, on April 25, 1915, the Anzacs and British stormed on to the heavily defended beaches.

Anzacs make crude grenades from jam tins, bits of metal and match-lit fuses.

Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders have to improvise by heaving solid rock into place to form a breakwater at Cape Helles after the British onslaught there on April 25.

British troops use a makeshift piledriver built with timber baulks to hammer home foundations for a pier for landing supplies, following the costly landing at Cape Helles.

Men of the King's Own Scottish Borderers leap over their protective sandbags in a frontal assault against concealed Turkish machine-gunners at Cape Helles on June 4, 1915.

Suicide Gallipoli Style

The invading troops went ashore without a realistic plan of action. For lack of any alternative, they repeatedly launched suicidal frontal assaults against concealed Turkish machine-guns. In one such mission carried out at dawn on August 6, 1915, 400 Australians were lost in 15 minutes.

Dismounted Australian Light Horse were ordered out over the sandbags to attack the Turks on the Chunuk Bair Heights. In a whirlwind of machine-gun fire, they were wiped out within the space of only 30 seconds.

Two minutes later came the command for a second line to charge. These men had just seen their comrades annihilated, but they went over the top unhesitatingly. Except for one man who managed to crawl back, they, too, were swept away. A third line, despite the pleas of their officer, were also sacrificed without any gain. Similar charges at Cape Helles cost 17,000 men – mainly British – for an advance of 500 yards.

Weary and desperately hard-pressed British troops watch the welcome arrival of 6-inch Naval guns at Cape Helles on June 17. Army greatcoats have been piled over the guns to screen them from aerial observation.

Australians and New Zealanders at Anzac Cove charge into the withering fire from Turkish machine-guns. Charging lines like this one were mown down one after another.

A soldier shoots off an improvised catapult. Used to offset the drastic lack of trench mortars at Gallipoli, they threw a home-made bomb about 90 yards, but scored few successes.

A War Without Proper Weapons

A hail of well-directed Allied mortar- and shell-fire on the Turkish trenches could have swayed the balance of countless actions at Gallipoli. "More and more munitions will be needed," urged General Hamilton. But they were not forthcoming. The Navy, too, failed to provide accurate pin-point shelling of roofed-in enemy trenches, which were too well-hidden to be sighted from afar.

Mortars were so essential to this close-range fighting that home-made catapults and bombs were used, but with little effect. By August, all but one of the eight 60-pounder guns at Cape Helles had broken down through over-use, while only 900 shells for all guns there were held in reserve. Only human lives were not rationed by the Gallipoli commanders.

A hidden sentry in a Cape Helles trench watches for signs of the enemy through a periscope while comrades wait for action.

An exhausted firing party of Lancashire Fusiliers straggles back to the beach through Gulley Ravine for a short rest and – if possible – some shade from the burning sun.

A gun team fires one of the big 60-pounders used against the Turks at Cape Helles in May, 1915. A gunner (centre) sets shell fuses for the loader, who kneels behind him.

The Flow of Blood

Allied losses were staggering, exceeding even the gloomiest official predictions. The War Office had estimated 5,000 killed or wounded for the entire operation. The Director of Medical Services, Surgeon-General W. A. Birrell, had shocked them by planning for a total of 10,000. In the first six days alone, the Anzacs lost 6,500; five weeks later total losses for the campaign reached 60,000.

Chaos followed. Wounds were hurriedly dressed by a handful of doctors in dugouts or tents beneath a cliff. Many died lying in long lines on the hot beaches. Others perished, packed like sardines in transports or hospital ships on the way to Malta or Egypt. The captured German ship *Lutzow* arrived in Alexandria with several hundred wounded attended by the veterinary surgeon who had brought mules out in it. No one had even cleaned the vessel. "It was like a scene from the Inferno," said a New Zealander.

A Royal Army Medical Corps stretcher-bearer lights a cigarette for a wounded man awaiting attention from a surgeon.

In tents like these, below a cliff face at Gurkha Bluff, Cape Helles, Army surgeons struggled to do their best for the wounded. A shell bursts nearby.

A surgeon examines the bullet he has just extracted from a soldier's forearm in a 42nd East Lancs Field Ambulance tent.

Stretcher-bearers carry a casualty along a crowded, sun-baked trench to a battlefield dressing station for emergency treatment.

A horse-drawn ambulance flounders through the mud of tortuous Gulley Ravine, Cape Helles, after heavy November rain.

An Anzac soldier pauses beside the rough cross marking a comrade's lonely grave at Gallipoli.

Success at Last

After so much heroism and sacrifice, withdrawal was the final tragedy. When the Anzacs and British evacuated their trenches, they had achieved precisely nothing. "I hope *they* won't hear us going down to the beaches," said an Australian soldier with a sorrowing look at the graves that lined one of the hillside cemeteries.

Ironically, the withdrawal itself was a brilliant success. It started on the night of December 18 at Suvla and Anzac beaches beneath the Turks' noses – a ghostly nocturnal departure – and by December 20, some 80,000 men, 5,000 animals and vast quantities of stores had been spirited off.

At Cape Helles, too, withdrawal was made by stealth and by January 8, one week after it began, 35,000 troops and tons of equipment were safely embarked. The operation was a miraculous success. Rearguards withdrew at 3.45 a.m. and minutes later fused ammunition dumps exploded. Alerted at last, enemy gunners began shelling the empty British trenches.

Masses of equipment are embarked from Cape Helles, on January 7, 1916. By 3.45 a.m. on January 8, when the last man left, most of it was away and the enemy had not been alerted.

Troops and a gun are towed by raft to a transport at Suvla Point in mid-December, 1915. Part of the Allied evacuation was deliberately carried out in daylight so that the Turks would believe they were watching the routine relief operations by fresh units from the base at Lemnos.

JUNGLE WAR IN EAST AFRICA

The fighting in German East Africa (now Tanzania) was the most prolonged outside Europe. Beginning on November 14, 1914, when Major-General A.E.Aitken failed to seize the vital port of Tanga, it did not finally end until November 25, 1917.

Jan Christiaan Smuts, South African soldier and statesman, assumed command of the British Empire forces in February, 1916. Opposing them were askaris, the German-officered African soldiers led by the formidable General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. Smuts brought his great strategic ability and fiery leadership to a campaign fought in a tropical region almost as big as Western Europe.

Von Lettow's task was to hold at all costs this last surviving colony of the German Empire and to tie down as many Allied troops as possible in doing so. But Smuts surprised him by launching his troops southwards through Kenya in a bold drive against the tough askaris.

General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck (second from right), C.-in-C. in German East Africa, relaxes. His

Brigadier-General F. H. Cunliffe, commanding the Nigerian Brigade, brought his seasoned troops straight from a victorious campaign in the Cameroons to aid Smuts in the war in East Africa.

three-year struggle had not yet begun.

A company of askaris, troops drawn from the best fighters in German East Africa, undergo formal Prussian training.

Infantrymen of the 55th (Coke's) Rifles, Indian Army Frontier Force, prepare to pitch camp in September, 1916, near the port of Kilwa.

Three-Year Campaign Against Nature

General Smuts and his Empire forces had to pit themselves against, not one, but two equally formidable adversaries in East Africa: the German military machine itself – and Nature at her most hostile. The struggle, Smuts wrote later, was largely "a campaign against Nature, in which climate, geography and disease fought more effectively against us than the well-trained enemy."

Jungle, forest, mountain, river and swamp were made even more intractable barriers by an efficient and determined enemy who, wherever possible, wrecked every road, railway, bridge and river crossing in his retreat.

The intense heat also took its toll. It exhausted Smuts's white troops, making them an easy prey to disease. In one week of 1916 alone, 9,000 men – including 200 officers – were incapacitated by sickness. Disease, caused mainly by the tsetse-fly, struck animals as well as men. In a few weeks it killed 10,000 horses and 11,000 oxen, adding greatly to Smuts's supply problem.

Despite these handicaps, Smuts attacked General von Lettow-Vorbeck's forces with unrelenting vigour. In a series of swift marches, he drove them from stronghold after stronghold, throwing them back from well-defended river lines often before they had time to blow bridges. Ninety per cent of von Lettow's troops had been killed or captured when, in November, 1917, he was forced to flee into Portuguese territory. There, with 2,000 men, he was able to hold out until the end of the war one year later.

A mass of tangled steel and crumbled stone is all that remains of a rail and foot bridge near Dar-es-

It took men of the 2nd African Road Corps just seven days to construct a substitute bridge over the Ruwu River with tree tunks and logs from the surrounding forest.

Salaam destroyed by the retreating Germans. Smuts' task was made infinitely more difficult by von Lettow's policy of destroying communications as he

African Pioneers of the 2nd Road Corps manhandle tree trunks cut down in the bush for use in bridge-building. The Pioneers' unstinted enthusiasm made up for their lack of equipment.

SEA RAIDERS

On the outbreak of war, a clutch of German battle cruisers – *Emden* in the Bay of Bengal, *Königsberg* in the Arabian Sea, *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and others in the Pacific – set about the destruction of Britain's mercantile lifeline with the Empire and other friendly powers. Next to seeking decisive battle with Germany's High Seas Fleet, the elimination of these ruthless and elusive raiders became the Royal Navy's prime task.

Somewhere in this maze of waterways, linking up with the Rufiji River, East Africa, lurked the German cruiser *Königsberg*. It took the Royal Navy 11 months to find and destroy her.

ome Royal Naval officers view the
aterlogged *Königsberg* in the Rufiji River.
he was sunk in July, 1915.

[illegible] of the Rufiji River were [illegible] *Königsberg*.

This photograph, taken from a German prisoner, shows part of the enemy defences at the mouth of the Rufiji. But for the *Königsberg*, the river turned out to be grave as well as refuge.

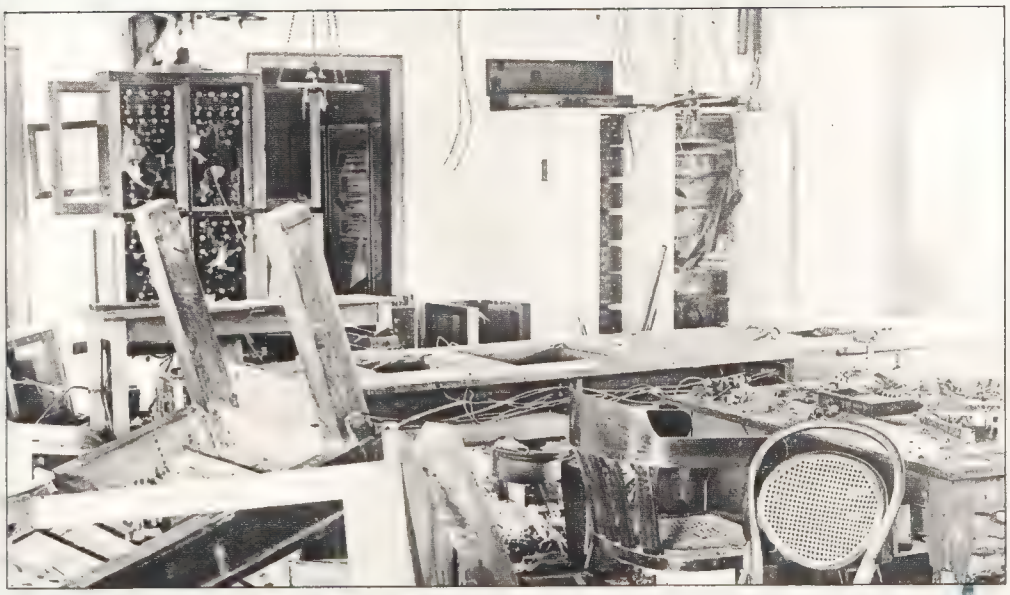
Scharnhorst and Gneisenau
1878

Revenge at the Falkland Islands

On November 1, 1914, the German battle cruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, sank the British armoured cruisers, *Good Hope* and *Monmouth*, near the Chilean port of Coronel. To avenge this unparalleled blow to British prestige and security, Admiral Sir Frederick Sturdee steamed south from home waters with five light cruisers and two modern heavy cruisers — *Inflexible* and *Invincible*.

At dawn, on December 8, German Admiral Maximilian von Spee's battle cruisers appeared off the Falkland Islands while Sturdee's squadron was coaling there. Von Spee tried to withdraw, but his ships were quickly overhauled and outgunned by Sturdee's superior armament. As shown in this wartime painting, the *Scharnhorst* capsized and sank.

The *Gneisenau* and two other ships followed her, and von Spee, his two sons and 2,000 other German sailors perished in the icy Atlantic. Britain's victory, wrote Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, not only "removed a grave menace to our trade in three oceans . . . perhaps, most of all, it gave renewed confidence to our Fleet and the Fleets of the Allies."



The instrument room of the wireless station on Direction Island lies wrecked by a raiding party from the German cruiser, *Emden*. The party landed on November 9, 1914.

The End of the Emden

One of Germany's most successful sea-raiders was the *Emden*. She had sunk 70,000 tons – £2 million worth – of Allied shipping in the Indian Ocean before she was finally cornered on November 9, 1914.

The critical moment came shortly after the *Emden*'s commander, Captain von Müller, had landed a party to destroy the cable and wireless station on Direction Island, one of the remote Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Suddenly the powerful Australian cruiser, *Sydney*, appeared on the horizon. The *Emden* fled, abandoning the raiding party. In a short, devastating encounter, she was battered into a twisted mass of wreckage and Captain von Müller was forced to ground her on a reef. Of his crew, 171 were killed or wounded.

The German cruiser, *Emden*, ravaged Allied shipping from the outbreak of war until her fatal encounter on November 9, 1914, with the Australian light cruiser, *Sydney*.

The German landing party wait on the Direction Island jetty after their ship has steamed off to do battle with the *Sydney*

THE DAILY MIRROR, Monday, December 21, 1914.

HOW WE SANK THE EMDEN: PHOTOGRAPHS

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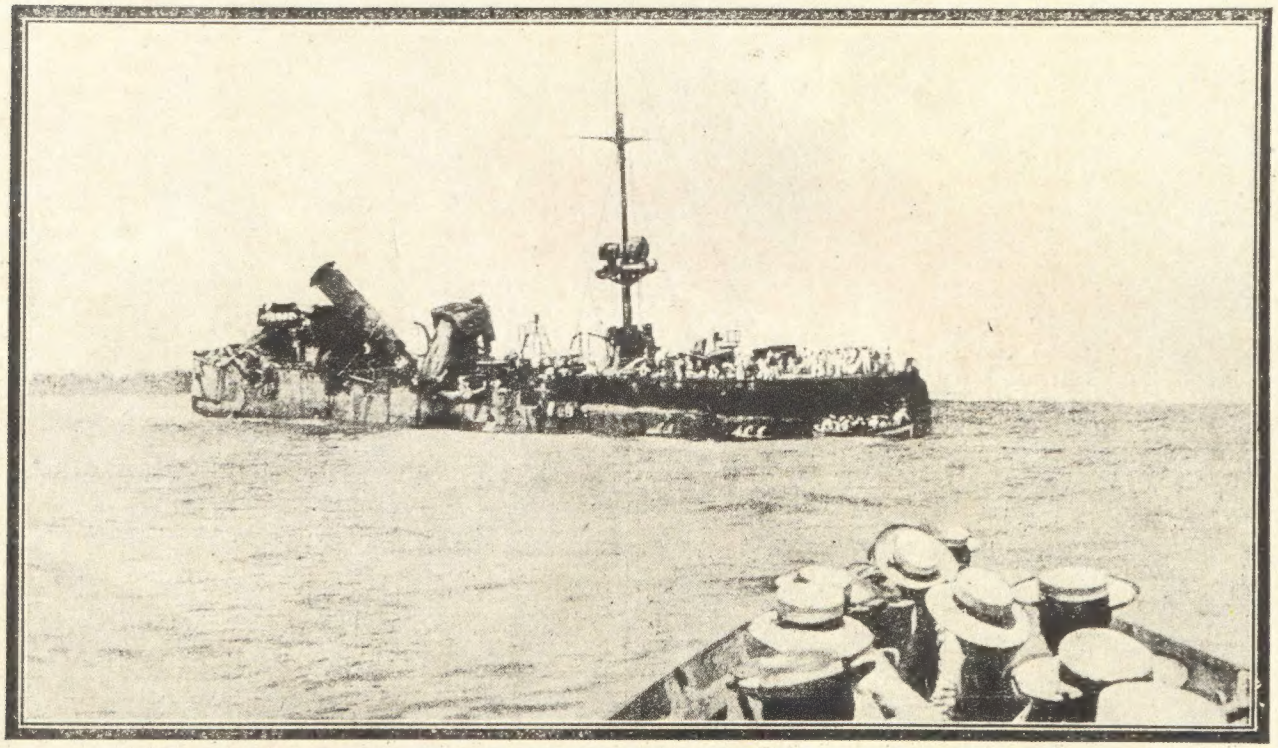
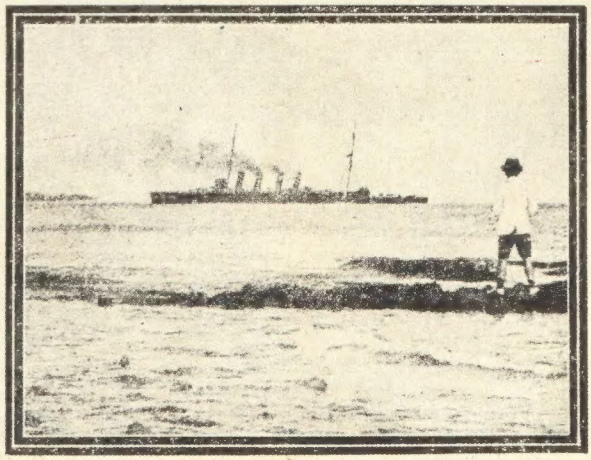
THE END OF THE EMDEN: THE LAST PHASE OF GERMANY'S MOST FAMOUS DESTROYER OF BRITISH COMMERCE.



The end of the action. Note the Emden's side and guns blown away on the port quarter-deck.

First boat-load of Emden prisoners.



H.M.S. Sydney just after she had sunk the Emden.

Taking the wounded on to H.M.S. Sydney.

These are the first photographs to reach England of the sinking of the Emden, the famous German corsair of the sea which destroyed so much valuable British commerce, by H.M.S. Sydney, of the Australian Navy. As will be seen from the photographs of the two ships taken at the conclusion of the engagement, the Emden proved no match for the Sydney. The German cruiser was shattered by the shell fire of the Sydney, but the British ship came out of the fight practically unscathed.

A British photo-report on how "we" sank the *Emden* – sunk, in fact, by the Australians – reflected the contemporary British belief that Australians were merely overseas Britons.

Commander, Royal Navy, 1830